

on asemic writing, for Diana, part 1
Jim Leftwich
Nov 1, 2021, 12:07 PM
to Diana

In 1996 I sent a few poems to a visual poet I knew and he responded by warning me that, if I continued in the direction I was going with the poems I sent to him, I would eventually wind up writing asemic poetry. That was the first time I saw the word "asemic".

Tim Gaze got in touch with me in 1997 and I published some of his experimental writings in the email zine I was editing at the time.

For me, asemic writing became a part of what I was doing as a writer as a logical extension of visual poetry. It never occurred to me that the word "asemic" might some day be used to describe a kind of visual art.

What asemic writing is has always seemed obvious to me. Poetry is a kind of writing. Visual poetry is a kind of poetry. Asemic writing is a kind of visual poetry.

Can quasi-calligraphic drawing be a kind of visual poetry? Maybe, but not necessarily.

Can intentionally illegible handwriting be a kind of visual poetry? Maybe, but again, not necessarily.

Tim Gaze did a lot of research into what he called "ancestors" of asemic writing, and he edited and published an important magazine called Asemic. His work was essential in spreading an awareness of the word, and in opening a discussion about the history and potential of the concept. Some of the important ancestors he identified were Henri Michaux, Hélène Smith, Christian Dotremont, and Mirtha Dermisache.

I am trying to be clear and precise about the history of the term, its discontinuous chronological development. Theories will come and go, but the accurate history doesn't change.

The word "asemic" has a history similar to that of the word "surreal," or "surrealism". Apollinaire first used the word "surrealism" in a letter he wrote in 1917. But nothing was built upon that first usage, no adherents or practitioners emerged in relation to the word. Only after Breton used the word, in 1924, did it become a movement, eventually influencing all of the arts. Terms very similar to "asemic writing" were in use among visual poets in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s, but that usage did not result in a global interest in the theory and practice of asemic writing. Eventually the word "surreal" came to be applied to so many objects and experiences

that its meaning in common usage lost all clarity and precision. Something similar seems to be in the early stages of development with the word "asemic".

When Tim Gaze and I started using the term, in 1998, I was already involved in small (micro) press publishing, accompanied by a lot of correspondence (old school correspondence, letters in envelopes taken to the post office and mailed all over the world). The term "asemic writing" circulated very widely through my efforts as a small press poetry editor and correspondent. Even more important, however, was the magazine that Tim started publishing in 1998. It was called Asemic, and it had an enormous influence on increasing the awareness of the word. You can find digital versions of Tim's magazine here:

[asemic volume ~ 1](#)

[asemic 1](#)

[asemic 2,1](#)

[asemic 3](#)

[asemic 4](#)

Michael Jacobson discovered the term "asemic writing" sometime around 2005 and it became enormously important to him. More than anyone, Michael is responsible for the exponential growth of interest in all things asemantic over the past 15 years or so. His blog, his facebook group, and his press have all been very influential.

In 2012, De Villo Sloan started a "asemic writing for mail artists" group which became large and influential as well. His Asemantic Front 2 blog is still going strong.

on asemantic writing, for Diana, part 2
Jim Leftwich
Mon, Nov 1, 12:07 PM
to Diana

Jim Leftwich, Jan 27, 1998 (from a letter to Tim Gaze): A seme is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a sememe, analogous with phoneme). An asemantic text,

then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning. As such, the asemic text would seem to be an ideal, an impossibility, but possibly worth pursuing for just that reason.

jim leftwich, Jun 10, 2011, post to the ASEMIC Google Group

there is no such thing as asemic writing.

in fact, there is no such thing as asemic anything. everything is readable, ie., can be and will be given meaning.

the asemic is an unattainable ideal.

in striving toward it, many mutations of writing and drawing (and other practices: photographing, to name but one) will come into being.

this is the value of the asemic.

working with asemia (attempting to write it, attempting to read and/or not read it) is a training exercise, and the products of that training exist as documentation of the process.

Here is a text I compiled about 5 years ago. It consists primarily of theories and definitions written by practitioners of asemic writing.

[Asemic Writing: Definitions & Contexts: 1998-2016](#)

Here is a short text of mine, written earlier this year:

[a brief note on desemantized writing / jim leftwich. 2021](#)

Here are some examples of desemantized writing from 1997, and earlier, by myself and some others, scattered throughout the issues of two email magazines published in the 1990s (Juxta/Electronic, which I edited, and The Experioddacist, edited by Jake Berry), and

by Tim Gaze

<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/epc/ezines/exper/>

#17

<https://www.writing.upenn.edu/epc/ezines/juxta/>

#24 & #22

What became asemic writing didn't begin for us as quasi-calligraphic drawing.

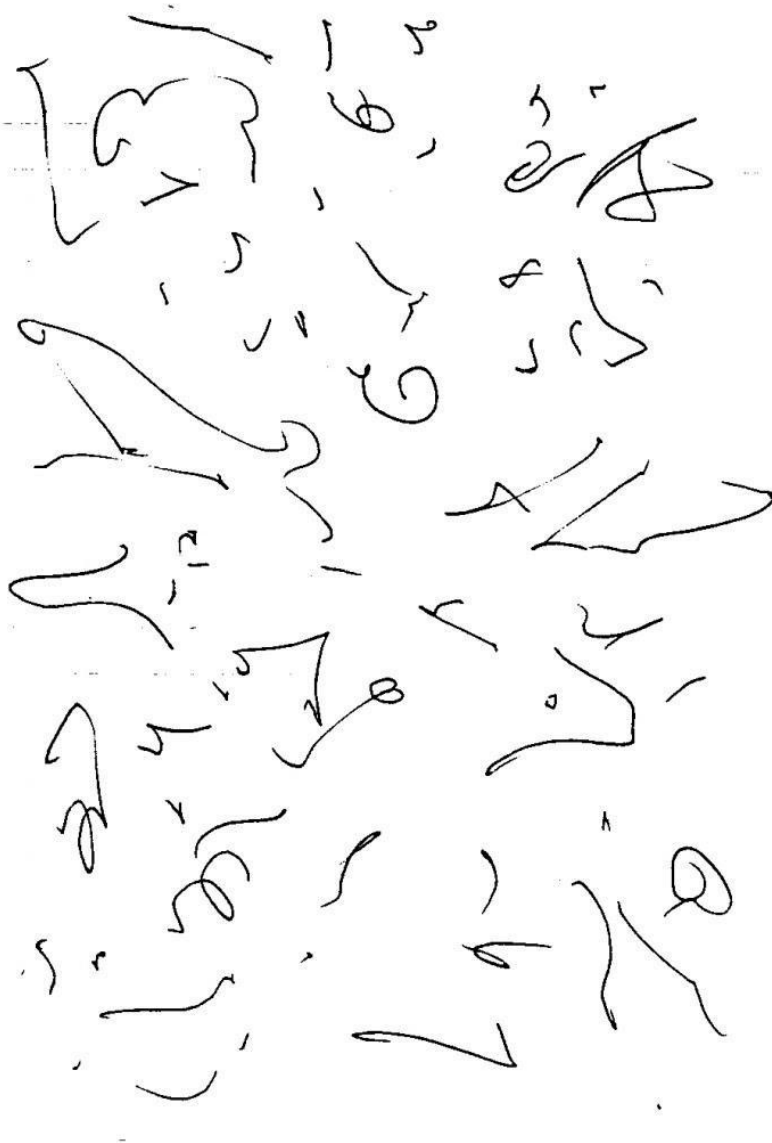
Many other textual experiments and explorations can be found in the issues of Lost & Found Times just before and after issue 39.

We were writing [prose](#). We were writing [poems](#). We were making [visual poems](#). Asemic writing developed as an extension of all of these practices, but perhaps most distinctly as a variety of visual poetry.

The wheel of asemic writing has been invented many times, but only once did it lead to what has come to be known as the asemic movement. We didn't invent it in the late 1990s, we merely discovered it for ourselves. If one begins with the lyric poem, and explores all of the possible routes leading away from the traditional lyric, one will eventually arrive at some version of asemic writing. Break the word down to the syllable, break the syllable down to the letter, break

the letter down to its component parts... etc and etc. Open any Norton Anthology, to any page, and asemic writing is always already there, just one short train of thought away from rhyme-schemes, line-breaks, and repeated rhythmic patterns.

Tim Gaze / on **Jim Leftwich**



I opened **Lost & Found Times** #39 (November 1997), and encountered a collection of marks by Jim Leftwich on the top portion of page 19. A more linear group of illegible marks by Jim was on the opposite page, with single verbal poems by other poets underneath each.

Seeing this work, my initial thoughts were something like: is this really poetry? Is it even writing?

Although there are hints of numbers and letters, the composition destroys any sense of an orderly grid, and raises doubts about what these marks are meant to mean.

A few months after seeing this for the first time, I sampled part of it, added my own marks, and published the resulting collaboration in **asemic volume ~ 1**, as well as the original rotated 90 degrees clockwise.

I get a sense of fun, creative energy from this piece. It had an effect not unlike an article in the punk fanzine **Sideburns** (1977), along the lines of “Here are 3 chords. Now form a band!”

Whether or not Jim intended this creation to be poetry or visual poetry, it certainly gave me pause for thought, and made me question many of my assumptions about reading, writing and poetry. Probably more than anything else, it stimulated me to begin to explore what we now call asemic writing, as a creator, explainer and publisher.

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issues of Lost and Found Times, archived here:
<https://kb.osu.edu/handle/1811/45310/recent-submissions?offset=15>

If you want a very large and complex view of the theory and practice of asemic writing, with a focus on its history and its potential, I suggest getting in touch with Marco Giovenale. He knows more than anyone about the subject. His knowledge of the history of the idea in Italian poetry is essential to an understanding of what asemic is all about.

Attachments area [LAFT 39]

Am Horseshoe (1996), and related
Jim Leftwich
Mon, Nov 1, 2:53 PM (9 days ago)
to Diana
EM AGON Bennett & Leftwich Luna Bisonte 1995
AM HORSESHOE Bennett & Leftwich Luna Bisonte 1996

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/textimagepoetry/sets/72157657301272176/>

Asemic writing has as one of its immediate antecedents my experiment of rewriting a John M. Bennett poem while thinking about Stephen Smale's horseshoe map and the concept of topological mixing. Words and letters that begin far apart will eventually be close together, and words and letters that begin close together will eventually be far apart. The variations are at least in theory endless. (cf., *Am Horseshoe*, John M. Bennett & Jim Leftwich, Luna Bisonte Prods, 1996)

I took this kind of procedural experimentation and added to it a subjective, processual stage of associational improvisation. One source text could provide the initial conditions, so to speak, for the generation of a long series of derivative texts.

The kinds of texts produced via these procedures and processes seemed at least potentially destined for asemia. The crucial aspect of this critical concept was (and is) its existence as potential, not as actuality.

Therefore, then and now: no such thing as asemic writing, only a kind of unattainable goal posited as a source of energy for our ongoing textual mutations.

https://jimleftwichtextimagepoem.blogspot.com/2015/07/jim-leftwich-subjective-asemic_7.html